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ABSTRACT

Observing writers in isolation, pulling them into research settings in neatly designed studies will reveal nothing about the circumstances that enable people to write. Context, or the setting in which writing actually takes place, may be the most enabling circumstance. Many first grade teachers believe their students cannot write or even spell. However, observations of first grade classrooms, as well as those of other grades where students have written considerably, have shown that teachers--by examing their own writing processes, by writing and sharing their writing with their students, by allowing students to generate their own topics based on experience, and by realizing that there is never just one thing that changes or improves a student's writing--can create enabling circumstances for young writers. Teachers can begin to understand how their own composing process works and become sensitive to what fosters composing and what inhibits it. They can become models who engage in all of the activities in which the class engages. Studying what these teachers do and how they do it poses a challenge to traditional writing research. Collected writing samples and pretests and posttests are not sufficient to understand how writers develop. Researchers need to be more sensitive to learning and writing contexts. (HTH)

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Creativity and the Composing Process: Making Thought Visible

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In a book entitled Silences, Tillie Olsen speaks of "enabling circumstances" and asks "What are the circumstances that enable people to write?" Implicit in her question is the notion that under the right circumstances, all of us would be creative. After several years of studying the writing process, I have reached a similar conclusion. I believe that the desire to make meaning is a universal one and that the act of writing enables us to do so. And similarly I now ask, under what circumstances are we enabled to write?

For me, this is not a speculative question--but one that guides my research. For the last several years, my research has focused on individuals. I've asked, how do writers write? How do they move from thought to text? And I've attempted to describe this process as I've seen it develop in different writers over different periods of time. But recently, I've begun to see a shortcoming in this kind of approach. Focusing on writers in isolation will not tell us anything about enabling circumstances. As a result, my interests have begun to shift and I've begun to pay attention not only to how writers write, how they externalize their thought and make it visible, but also on the ways in which the environment including teachers, parents, and peers is an enabling or an inhibiting vehicle in this process. I've come to think that observing writers in isolation, pulling them into research settings in neatly designed studies

CS206297

was an important first step for research on the writing process but that now we need to examine what writers do in context -- in the settings in which their writing actually takes place. And I'm beginning to think that it is the context itself which may be the most important enabling circumstance.

Thus in this talk on creativity and the composing process, I want to raise some questions about creativity and the composing classroom. In particular, I want to ask, what would teachers need to know in order to create enabling circumstances in their classrooms? and what would researchers need to know if they wanted to observe this process?

This topic is particularly compelling to me because I've been spending a lot of time in the past two years in public school classrooms, learning how to observe teachers at work. The teachers are people with whom I've worked for two summers, who have invited me into their classrooms so that I might discover how they are translating the findings from research on the writing process into circumstances that enable students to write. The particular teachers I will be referring to today all work in a school district on Long Island - a district which has given serious attention to the teaching of writing by involving the teachers in writing workshops over the summer.

Talking about teachers and their work leads me to comment on what it is like to be an observer in another teacher's classroom. When I first agreed to these visits, I was concerned. First of all, not only am I a teacher, accustomed to being in control, in this setting I had also been the teacher's teacher. I was a bit worried that I wouldn't like

playing the role of the unobstrusive observer. Secondly, I felt awkward. I'm used to teaching adults on the college level and now I was being asked to visit not only high schools and middle schools, but elementary schools as well. I was not at all sure what one said to first graders about their writing. On my first visit to first grade, I remember walking in and wondering where I should sit--thinking how natural I should act and feeling as if I didn't really belong there.

Well, first graders made me feel quite at ease. I wasn't in the classroom for more than a few minutes before children were coming over and asking, "May I read you my first published book?" I realized that their teacher, Reba, as I know her , knew something about enabling circumstances. Later on in the year, a woman I had not worked with, a first grade teacher next door to Reba, invited me to her room to see what she was doing and then told me that the children were waiting for me to talk to them about writing. I experienced the familiar pang of "What do I say to first graders?" and went in. The teacher asked me to sit in the back on a small chair and had the children form a circle on the floor around me. Each child was holding a book he or she had written and was waiting for me to say something. I told them that I visit a lot of first grades, and most of the teachers there tell me that first graders cannot write, that these teachers were just convinced that first graders do not know how to write. At first, the children looked surprised and then smiles broke out on their faces and they began waving hands and saying, "We can write. First graders can write." I then said, "But they say that first graders don't even know how to spell." And one girl looked puzzled for a moment and then raised her hand and explained, "You see, we use invented

spelling."

By now the teacher in me wanted to stay in first grade and the researcher in me wished that I had a video-tape to record the children's excitement. But the more serious part of me realized that Reba had communicated something to her co-worker about enabling circumstances that enabled this teacher who had not been part of our work in the summer to create a classroom full of writers, and writers in first grade, who seemed to know something about their own writing process. The point, though, is not that Reba and her co-worker are exceptional. Competent and dedicated, yes - but the experience I am describing was not limited to their classrooms. Wherever I go now in this district, I see students engaged in writing and taking their work seriously whether they are in first grade, 4th, 8th, or 10th. And everyone of the teachers I visit knows something about enabling circumstances.

It's going to take a long time for me to discover precisely what these teachers know and how they translate their knowledge into classroom practice, but some of their thinking is given voice in a paper written by Ross Burkhardt, an 8th grade teacher, who describes the way he teaches writing. I would like to read a few excerpts:

> I am a different person in working with kids and their writing this year.
>
> Examining my own writing process taught me what a writing process is and how to nurture it. And, by inference, I can do the same for others.
>
> Students now collaborate when writing. It seems hard for me to remember those distant days when I believed that collaboration on a writing assignment was aking to cheating.
>
> I write every assignment the students do. They see me keeping journals on several topics. They read my letters. They discuss my pieces. I include a piece in the class booklet because I am an author in that class.

> Many kids were doing the "I don't know what to write" routine earlier in the year. I find less of that now. Somehow they do generate their own topics. I also see an improvement in writing since the fall. The pieces appear to be deeper, more complex, better detailed, more interesting. Sharing writing with peers has helped foster this growth, but that is not the only reason for it.

What are the reasons for the growth Ross sees? What kind of knowledge enables Ross and the others to do what they do? Now I become an observer, a researcher, attempting to make sense out of what I see. Based on my classroom observation and Ross' statements, I have come to some conclusions about fostering creativity in the composing classroom which probably apply to all of the teachers, but which for now I will state only in reference to Ross.

1. Ross' knowledge is experiential. He had to examine his own writing process and understand its intricacies, its peculiarities and what he needed to nurture it, before he would know anything about helping his students work through and develop their composing processes.
2. Whether he says it or not, Ross know that what he does communicates more strongly than anything he says. He may talk about writing--but in addition he writes--and he shares his writing with his students. This, I imagine, as much as anything else exemplifies the kind of classroom in which the circumstances are enabling.
3. Ross remarks that he used to think that collaboration was akin to cheating. So did I. I remember as a student when I used to write in class and I would cover up my page so that no one else could see it. Now Ross knows (as do I--and the constant letters and phone conversations among Nancy, Don, and me about our papers for today serve as proof of this) that writers require real audiences, listeners who are trained to respond sensitively to their developing thoughts. In fact, I would argue that

the meanings we construct always emerge from and form part of a social fabric. The more directly we rely and build on the social fabric of the classroom, the more able we will be both to distinguish ourselves from it and to see our connections to it.

4. Ross knows that writers need to develop a sense of responsibility for their own voices. He knows that the experience of authoring is one that begins with authority, that writers must start with what they know. Thus in his class, students generate and therefore "own" their own topics.
5. When Ross indicates that his students' papers are better, deeper, more complex and that sharing with peers has helped, he also says that that is not the only reason. I would say he recognizes that there is never just one reason why something changes or improves in one's writing, that in writing classes there is never a simple cause and effect relationship to explain growth. In fact, I think he recognizes the importance of everything that occurs in the classroom or the importance of context.

One might ask, what enabled Ross and Reba and the other teachers in this district to teach the way they do? What allowed them to create such enabling circumstances in the classroom? I can tell you they didn't find this knowledge in a textbook--not even a textbook on the writing process. In fact, to be the teachers they now are, Ross and Reba and the others had to be willing to go through a process themselves.

What I'd like to do now is describe briefly what this process entails and then comment on the kinds of questions this raises for researchers.

First, the teachers had to be willing to see that perhaps they didn't know all there was to know about the writing process. They had to be willing to ask questions. They had to suspend judgment about the answers.

Second, they had to be willing to write and to write seriously for 1 and a half to 2 hours a day for four weeks. They had to be willing to read this writing to their peers and to listen to what their peers said in response.

Third, they had to observe themselves closely. They had to keep notes about their writing process in a process journal. They had to be willing to keep observing, watching for moments of insight, awareness and change that occurred as they worked on their writing and to record these observations in the journal.

Fourth, they had to learn how to listen sensitively to the writing of the peers. They had to learn ways of attending to another writer.

Based on their willingness, these teachers began to see something--They began to understand how their own composing process worked and they began to be sensitive to what fostered composing and what inhibited it. By watching themselves as writers, they began to make some of the same observations researchers ~~make~~ make about the process--they began to understand how recursiveness works and when discovery occurs. They began to see how important their peers were in establishing a community of writers with common goals. And they began to see a new role for themselves as teachers--as models who engage in all of the activities that the class engages in.

The teachers who were willing to do this returned to their classrooms with the intention to have their students experience some of what they experienced and the conviction that it was possible. Through writing, they had contacted a desire in themselves, buried for many years, that assured them that they had a wish to be creative, to make meaning out of their experience, and to construct texts that accurately conveyed the subtleties of their thoughts and ideas. They also knew, experientially--that when placed in a setting that acknowledged this desire, writing emerged. And whether they were 1st grade teachers or 12th grade teachers, they knew now that it was possible to create a classroom context that acknowledged and built on this capacity--and that they could do this with their students.

Studying what these teachers do and how they do it poses a challenge to traditional research on writing. It implies that we can no longer merely collect writing samples and pre and post tests if we want to understand how children and adults develop as writers. It implies that we have to pay attention to the enabling circumstances of the classroom which means that as researchers we have to immerse ourselves in the life of classrooms and let the students and teachers there teach us what we need to know.

We need, in other words, to develop the perspective of ethnographers and to learn from the work of people like Claire Woods-Elliott at the University of Pennsylvania and Marie Wilson Nelson at the University of Georgia how to apply ethnographic techniques to the observation of writing classrooms. It means we have to become sensitive to the context in which teaching and learning occur and to move from our observations of behavior to inquire about the meaning this behavior has to the people who engage in it.

Finally, just as writing is a way of making thought visible, so ethnography is a way of making teaching visible. As I have begun reflecting on my experience as a classroom observer, I have come to realize how hidden teaching is . . . how much of it goes on behind closed doors--how little of it is observed except for formal evaluations--and what an extraordinary privilege it is to watch teachers at work. Seeing what they do, listening to their responses, watching how they conference with individual students, seeing the moments that come to life and the moments that fade away, the missed opportunities and the tiny successes, has come to be an extremely powerful experience for me and also an intimate one. It has left me realizing how much more we have to learn and how much more we have to gain by making visible the enabling circumstances of the composing classroom.